

Fugitive Mexican ex-governor moved to Guatemalan prison

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A former governor who had become a symbol of government corruption in Mexico was transferred to a Guatemalan military prison on Sunday hours after being captured in a hotel following six months on the lam.

Ex-Veracruz state Gov. Javier Duarte looked pale and visibly tired as he was brought to the military base in Guatemala's capital guarded by two dozen police officers. Prosecutors in Mexico directed the Foreign Relations Department to request his extradition to his homeland, where he is wanted on suspicion of money laundering and organized crime.

Duarte, 43, captured Saturday in Panajachel, a picturesque tourist town on Lake Atitlan in Guatemala's highlands, with the cooperation of that country's police and Interpol office, a statement from Mexico's federal Attorney General's Office said.

"I have no comment, thank you," the former Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, governor said to a question from The Associated Press as he entered the prison.

Duarte is accused of running a corruption ring that allegedly pilfered millions of dollars from Veracruz's coffers. State officials say schools, hospitals and other

public institutions were stripped of resources under Duarte's government and that of his predecessor.

Manuel Noriega, deputy director of Interpol in Guatemala, said Duarte would be presented before a judge to consider his possible extradition.

Political analyst Alejandro Hope said it is difficult to judge whether Duarte's capture — the second in a week of a high-profile, fugitive former PRI governor — will boost PRI President Enrique Pena Nieto's image in fighting corruption.

"In the best case it will give him a small boost in the short term but it also draws attention to the corruption of the governors," said Hope. And "he knows a lot of things about a lot of people."

Duarte was governor of Veracruz from 2010 until he left office Oct. 12, 2016, two months before the scheduled end of his term, saying he was doing so in order to face the allegations against him.

At the time he denied having links to phantom businesses that allegedly won state contracts, and said he had not stolen a single peso of state money or diverted government funds overseas.

"I don't have foreign accounts," he said last year. "I don't have properties anywhere."

Duarte promptly disappeared and had been sought by Mexican authorities ever since. Earlier this year, Interpol issued a notice for his capture.

The Mexican government has found millions of dollars purportedly linked to Duarte, frozen more than 100 bank accounts and also seized property and businesses tied to the former governor. A reward of 15 million pesos (\$730,000) had been offered for his capture.

While on the lam, Duarte was supported by a network of Mexicans who helped him evade justice, Omar Garcia Harfuch, head of the Criminal Investigation Agency in Mexico's Attorney General's Office, told a press conference Sunday.

Garcia Harfuch said investigators "identified many homes, telephone numbers and vehicles related to people who supported Javier Duarte from Mexico City in the logistics of his stay and movement in Guatemala."

"During the investigation, it came to light that various private airlines offering services to the region were charged with transporting (Duarte) to different points in Guatemala," he said.

Authorities were tipped off to his presence in Guatemala by the Nov. 10, 2016

detention of a person at the airport in the border city of Tapachula. The person was carrying two passports with photographs of the ex-governor and his wife but with different names.

Garcia Harfuch did not provide the names of the people helping Duarte from Mexico City. But authorities in Mexico vowed to recover the money Duarte allegedly stole and bring to justice his accomplices.

"Justice will be done," said new Veracruz Gov. Miguel Angel Yunes, a bitter critic of Duarte. "Let there be no mercy for those who were merciless to the people of Veracruz. There will be no pardon."

The detention comes a week after Tomas Yarrington, the former governor of Mexico's Tamaulipas state, was arrested in Italy, also on allegations of organized crime and money laundering.

Another ex-governor, Cesar Duarte of Chihuahua state, is also wanted on suspicion of corruption and is said to have fled to El Paso, Texas. He is not related to Javier Duarte.

All three ex-governors were members of Pena Nieto's ruling PRI.

The party, which expelled Javier Duarte on Oct. 25, 2016, and has sought to distance itself from him, applauded the arrest.

"The PRI calls for all the relevant investigations to be carried out and, respecting due process, for the ex-governor of Veracruz to be punished in an exemplary fashion, as well as anyone who is confirmed to have taken part in his criminal ring," the party said in a statement.

Duarte became a powerful symbol of alleged corruption during midterm elections last year in which the PRI lost several governorships, including Veracruz, that it had held uninterrupted since its founding in 1929.

Duarte also has been widely criticized for rampant violence in the state during his administration, as drug cartels warred for territory and thousands of people were killed or disappeared into clandestine graves in cases that mostly remain unsolved. The dead include at least 16 journalists slain in Veracruz during his six years in office.

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